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On Campus with Max Shulman

(Author of "Barefoot Boy With Cheek," etc.)

HOME, SWEET HOMECOMING

A great number of people have been asking me lately, "What is Homecoming?" Yesterday, for example, as I walked from my house to the establishment of Mr. Sigafoos, the local lepidopterist where I had left a half dozen luna moths to be mounted – a distance of no more than three blocks – I'll wager that well over a thousand people stopped me and said, "What is Homecoming?"

Well, what with company coming for dinner and the cook down with a recurrence of breakbone fever, I could not tarry to answer their questions. "Read my column next week," I cried to them. "I'll tell all about Homecoming." With that I brushed past and raced home to baste the mallard and apply poultices to the cook, who, despite my unending ministrations, expired quietly during the night, a woman in her prime, scarcely 108 years old. Though her passing grieved me, it was some satisfaction to be able to grant her last wish – to be buried at sea – which is no small task when you live in Pierre, South Dakota.

With the dinner guests fed and the cook laid to her watery rest, I put out the cat and turned to the problem of Homecoming.

First of all, let us define Homecoming. Homecoming is a weekend when old graduates return to their alma maters to see a football game, ingest great quantities of food and drink, and inspect each other's bald spots.

This occasion is marked by the singing of old songs, the slapping of old backs, and the frequent utterance of such outcries as "Harry, you old polecat!" or "Harry, you old rooster!" or "Harry, you old wombat!" or "Harry, you old mandrill!" All old grads are named Harry.

During Homecoming the members of the faculty behave with unaccustomed animation. They laugh and smile and pound backs and keep shouting, "Harry, you old retriever!" These unscholarly actions are performed in the hope that the old grads, in a transport of *bonhomie*, will endow a new geology building.

The old grads, however, are seldom seduced. By game time on Saturday, their backs are so sore, their eyes so bleary, and their livers so sluggish that it is impossible to get a kind word out of them, much less a new geology building. "Hmphh!" they snort as the home team completes a 101 yard march to a touchdown. "Call that football? Why, back in my day they'd have been over on the first down. By George, football was football back in those days – not this namby pamby girls game that passes for football today. Why, look at that bench. Fifty substitutes sitting there! Why, in my day, there were eleven men on a team and that was it. When you broke a leg, you got taped up and went right back in. Why, I remember the big game against State. Harry Wallaby, our star quarterback, was killed in the third quarter. I mean he was pronounced dead. But did that stop old Harry? Not on your tintype! Back in he went and kicked the winning drop-kick in the last four seconds of play, dead as he was. Back in my day, they played *football*, by George!"

Everything, say the old grads, was better back in their day – everything except one. Even the most unreconstructed of the old grads has to admit that back in his day they never had a smoke like today's vintage Philip Morris – never anything so mild and pleasing, day in day out, at study or at play, in sunshine or in shower, on grassy bank or musty taproom, afoot or ahorse, at home or abroad, any time, any weather, anywhere.

I take up next another important aspect of Homecoming – the decorations in front of the fraternity house. Well do I remember one Homecoming of my undergraduate days. The game was against Princeton. The Homecoming slogan was "*Hold That Tiger!*" Each fraternity house built a decoration to reflect that slogan, and on the morning of the game a group of dignitaries toured Fraternity Row to inspect the decorations and award a prize for the best.

The decoration chairman at our house was an enterprising young man named Rex Sigafoos, nephew of the famous lepidopterist. Rex surveyed Fraternity Row, came back to our house and said, "All the other houses are building cardboard cages with cardboard tigers inside of them. We need to do something different – and I've got it. We're going to have a *real* cage with a *real* tiger inside of it – a snarling, clawing, slashing, real live tiger!"

"Crikey!" we breathed. "But where will you get him?"

"I'll borrow him from the zoo," said Rex, and sure enough, he did.

Well sir, you can imagine what a sensation it was on Homecoming morning. The judges drove along nodding politely at cardboard tigers in cardboard cages and suddenly they came to our house. No sham beast in a sham cage here! No sir! A real tiger in a real cage – a great striped jungle killer who slashed and roared and snarled and dashed himself against the bars of his cage with maniacal fury.

There can be no doubt that we would have easily taken first prize had not the tiger knocked out the bars of the cage and leaped into the official car and devoured Mr. August Schlemmer, the governor of the state, Mr. Wilson Ardsley Devereaux, president of the university, Dr. O. P. Gransmire, author of *A Treasury of the World's Great Southpaws: An Anthology of Left Hand Literature*, Mr. Harrison J. Teed, commissioner of weights and measures, Mrs. Amy Dorr Nesbitt, inventor of the clarinet, Mr. Jarrett Thrum, world's 135 pound lacrosse champion, Mr. Peter Bennett Hough, editor of the literary quarterly *Spasm*, and Mrs. Ora Wells Anthony, first woman to tunnel under the North Platte River.

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